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Sixtieth year

Provisional

5166th meeting

Thursday, 21 April 2005, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Wang Guangya	(China)
Members:	Algeria	Mr. Baali
	Argentina	Mr. Mayoral
	Benin	Mr. Adechi
	Brazil	Mr. Sardenberg
	Denmark	Ms. Løj
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Greece	Mrs. Papadopoulou
	Japan	Mr. Kitaoka
	Philippines	Mr. Baja
	Romania	Mr. Dumitru
	Russian Federation	Mr. Konuzin
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Thomson
	United Republic of Tanzania	Mr. Manongi
	United States of America	Mr. Vrooman

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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05-31655 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Prendergast: Recent events in the Middle East continue to confirm the potential for peace, but warn us that this new process is still fragile. I think all of us are aware that it will take time, patience and courage to rebuild trust and confidence between Israelis and Palestinians. A degree of edginess and renewed suspicion has been evident in the past month about, on the one side, Israeli intentions and, on the other, Palestinian resolve and capabilities. If sustained progress is to be made, it is important that those doubts and suspicions be dispelled.

It is against that background that Israel is preparing to withdraw from settlements in the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank sometime this summer. The act of disengagement, in and of itself, will be a landmark in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The pressing challenge for the parties and the international community is to take all possible actions to ensure that disengagement happens, that it happens in a coordinated way and that it does not become a dead end, but contributes to the momentum for peace. As the Quartet has stated and restated, a full and complete withdrawal, undertaken in a manner consistent with the road map, would be an important step towards realizing the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

As the Council knows, on 14 April the Quartet principals named Mr. James Wolfensohn as their Special Envoy to coordinate the international community's efforts in support of the disengagement initiative. His task is to promote coordination and cooperation between the two parties. The Secretary-General has commented that Mr. Wolfensohn's blend of vision and experience makes him uniquely qualified to support the post-withdrawal revival of the Palestinian economy. The Quartet envoys met yesterday in Jerusalem and discussed preparations for the disengagement initiative and how best to support Mr. Wolfensohn.

Within the Israeli polity, Prime Minister Sharon has overcome the remaining official challenges to his withdrawal initiative. On 28 March, the Knesset rejected draft legislation to introduce a national referendum on disengagement. The next day, 29 March, the 2005 State budget was passed by a Knesset plenum, averting the need for new elections. However, despite support from the Knesset and from a majority of Israelis, some elements of Israeli society have increased their protests and incitement against the Government and the Prime Minister, and have vowed to resist actively the disengagement process. Israeli preparations for the evacuation and for the related process of relocating Israeli settlers are ongoing, notwithstanding continued opposition from the militant minority.

On the Palestinian side, both President Abbas and Prime Minister Qurei announced that the Palestinian Authority was prepared to coordinate the withdrawal with Israel, despite the Palestinian Authority's political concerns regarding the plan, which had initially been a unilateral initiative. President Abbas has established a ministerial committee for coordination, headed by the Prime Minister, with technocratic ministers assigned sectoral subcommittees — including in the areas of housing and planning — tasked with preparations for the pullout and longer-term strategies for the period after disengagement.

It is welcome that each of the two parties has publicly reiterated its willingness to coordinate with the other. However, we are concerned at reports that that announced readiness to coordinate has not yet been sufficiently translated into practice. Direct

dialogue and communication are essential first steps towards ensuring that the disengagement is as smooth and non-violent as possible. I was pleased to learn that high-level meetings between Deputy Prime Minister Peres and Prime Minister Qurei and between Israeli Defence Minister Mofaz and Minister Dahlan took place today to discuss the economic and military aspects of the disengagement.

Coordination and cooperation will be needed even more in the challenging transition period once disengagement is complete. The Palestinian Authority and the newly elected municipalities in Gaza face a deeply impoverished population in which tribal and family ties have strongly re-emerged. Immediate challenges for the Authority and for civil society include rebuilding the rule of law and a respected security sector that can reassert the monopoly over the use of force that is a characteristic of any functioning State.

Despite the doubts and the difficult challenges ahead, the hope and optimism of the past months remain. That is confirmed by the continued overall decline in casualties, violence and military operations. However, we are seeing on the ground indicators of the fragility of the current situation. Particularly disturbing is the apparent failure to break the tendency towards retributive violence, so that even one incident carries with it the risk of escalation.

On 9 April, Israeli soldiers deployed in Rafah on the "Philadelphi route" opened fire on a group of Palestinian youths, killing 14-year-old Ahmad al-Jazar as well as Ashraf Musa and Khaled A'anam, both 15 years old. All three were found to be unarmed. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) reported that its soldiers had believed the youths were armed and were engaged in weapon smuggling. When news of the deaths spread, Palestinian militants fired nearly 80 mortars and Qassem rockets at the Gush Katif settlement over a three-day period, causing material damage but, fortunately, no casualties.

On 11 April, the Israeli army launched an arrest campaign in Nablus, searching for a suspect with alleged links to Hizbullah; however, 22 Palestinians were injured during the operation. On 14 April, also in Nablus, an Israeli undercover unit killed a wanted Al-Aqsa Brigades militant in a shoot-out during an arrest operation; the IDF charged that the militant had been planning a suicide bombing attack. President Abbas condemned the killings and accused Israel of undermining the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings.

The month also witnessed a number of actual or attempted Palestinian military operations against Israeli targets, resulting in injuries in some cases. There were also numerous Israeli arrest campaigns and worrying reports of increased settler vigilante attacks against Palestinian civilians in West Bank villages. Those incidents underscore that — as I said at the beginning — the state of affairs remains fragile and that, unless there is positive movement, the situation could easily deteriorate again.

There is no quick fix to this conflict. We can and should, however, reiterate the need for the parties to implement their commitments under the road map and the more recent Sharm el-Sheikh understandings.

Israel justifies its continuation of military incursions, arrest campaigns, curfews and movement restrictions as necessary to confront and pre-empt security threats. It charges the Palestinian Authority with not taking serious action against violence and militants. Palestinian leaders, for their part, claim that they are taking action but acknowledge that the process is slow and difficult. They believe that the ongoing Israeli military operations are counterproductive, in that they make it more difficult for the Palestinian Authority to disarm or arrest militants and in that they threaten the viability of the ceasefire.

Internally, Al-Aqsa militants have become the main disrupters of law and order, threatening Palestinian Authority officials and ordinary citizens alike. In response to those violent incidents, President Abbas declared a state of alert and began reshuffling the security forces in the West Bank. He subsequently announced his intention to disarm those Fatah militants who are on Israel's wanted list and proposed that the wanted persons be integrated into the Palestinian Authority's security agencies. President Abbas also appointed an interim chief of the Palestinian National Forces to replace Haj Ismail Jaber, who had been forced to resign.

In addition, President Abbas issued a presidential decree enforcing the security forces pension bill, which will lead to the retirement of some 2,000 security staff. Moreover, he announced that the Palestinian Authority will shortly reorganize and unify its security forces into three agencies operating under the direct command of the Minister of the Interior, a step that is required in

the road map. We expect those new appointments to be made shortly.

Those actions and announcements are positive and welcome, but they are clearly not enough. Security reform and a visible and sustained effort to stop all violent activity are basic requirements of the road map. As such, they cannot be a matter for compromise. The will to act must come from the Palestinian Authority.

However, there is also much that Israel could do to support, rather than hinder, President Abbas's ability to take difficult steps. The relevant confidence-building measures are clearly laid out in the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings and in phase one of the road map. Against the background of unmet obligations under the road map and insufficient progress on the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings, the joint Israeli-Palestinian committees dealing with fugitives, prisoners and the transfer of major urban centres in the West Bank did not meet in the past month. Security control was not transferred in any of the Palestinian cities during that period; nor were any prisoners released. Such steps are part and parcel of the wider process to coordinate and move forward together. We welcome General Ward's continued efforts to help reform the Palestinian security services and to assist in resolving outstanding issues between the parties related to security.

One of Israel's primary obligations under the road map, and an important confidence-building measure, is the requirement to halt all settlement activity, including natural growth, and to dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001. We have repeatedly expressed our concern over the fact that Israel has not yet lived up to its obligations in that respect.

We have therefore noted with great concern that, despite strong international objections, Prime Minister Sharon has publicly reiterated his commitment to the eventual implementation of the E1 plan aimed at connecting Jerusalem with the largest West Bank settlement, Maale Adumim. In addition, the Israeli Lands Authority announced on 18 April that it was inviting bids for the construction of 50 housing units in the West Bank settlement of Elkana.

In that connection, the Council will recall that President George W. Bush, after his recent meeting with Prime Minister Sharon, said that Israel should "not undertake any activity that contravenes road map obligations or prejudice final status negotiations".

President Bush added that "Israel should meet its road map obligations regarding settlements in the West Bank and remove unauthorized outposts". I believe, if I may say so, that this very much represents the position of all four members of the Quartet.

The fragile nature of the current situation is reflected in the Palestinian economy, which, despite modest improvements, is still in a state of crisis. Unemployment remains high, at a rate between 36 and 41 per cent in the Gaza Strip. Israeli measures to ease closure have not yet had positive effects on those rates. During the calendar month of March, as recent data show, 1,550 Palestinian workers entered Israel from the Gaza Strip, and an additional 540 worked in the Erez Industrial Zone. This amounted to a threefold increase in the total number of Gazans actively employed in Israel and the Industrial Zone, though this level remains much below the pre-intifada daily average of 30,000 workers.

I can report that the month of March did bring an improvement in trade flows between Israel and Gaza. Karni, Rafah and Sofa commercial crossings saw a significant easing of restrictions on the movement of goods. As a result, the value of goods passing through Karni more than doubled, from $26 million to $55 million.

On the fiscal front, the Palestinian Legislative Council on 30 March approved the delayed budget plan for 2005. The budget aims for fiscal revenues to the extent of $1 billion, though donor support will have to cover a deficit of more than $1.17 billion. Sixty percent of the budget will be allocated for Palestinian Authority (PA) wages and salaries.

In the context of the Palestinian budget vote, discussions continued to follow up on the London Conference of 1 March this year. These primarily involved the European Commission, the World Bank, Norway and the United Nations, and focused on reform of the existing donor coordination structure. The review has three main goals: first, to mainstream the reform agenda into the core of the aid coordination process; secondly, to ensure a more central role for the PA in aid management and coordination; and, thirdly, to make the aid coordination structures more effective in responding to needs.

If I may turn our attention to Lebanon, there have been a number of important developments.

Particularly worrying were a number of bombings that have caused great anxiety among the population. Since my last briefing of the Council, there have been a further two explosions. One occurred on 26 March in an industrial suburb north-east of Beirut. Another took place on 1 April underneath a shopping centre in the mountain town of Broumana, also north-east of Beirut. Fortunately, there were no fatalities as a result of either bombing. The Secretary-General has spoken out strongly against such acts of violence, reiterating his belief that the Lebanese people must be able to decide their future in a democratic and peaceful manner.

Following the resignation of Omar Karami on 13 April, Najib Mikati was appointed as Prime Minister-designate on 15 April, and on 19 April announced a new cabinet of 14 ministers. That important breakthrough comes after a period of political stalemate in the country. It is expected that the new cabinet will be put to a vote of confidence in Parliament shortly. Its main tasks will be to draft an electoral law that is acceptable to all and to oversee the conduct of Lebanon's parliamentary elections. We take this opportunity to emphasize again the importance of holding these elections within Lebanon's constitutional deadline, and we take positive note of Prime Minister-designate Mikati's undertaking to work towards that end.

On 7 April, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1595 (2005), establishing the International Independent Investigation Commission into the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The Government of Lebanon has undertaken to extend its full cooperation and support to the work of the Commission, whose work in Lebanon is expected to begin very shortly.

Many Lebanese came together on 13 April, the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of the civil war, to celebrate a day of national unity and to reject a return to the violence of the past. A few days beforehand, there was a public call by Bahia Hariri, a Member of Parliament and sister of the former Prime Minister, urging people back to the central district of Beirut so as to re-stimulate economic activity in the commercial hub of the city and to overcome the atmosphere of anxiety that prevailed after the spate of bombings. That resulted in large numbers returning to the central district.

If I may turn to south Lebanon, we are pleased to note the overall calm that seems to have prevailed along the Blue Line for some time now. Violations of the Line, however, have continued to take place, mostly in the form of recurring air violations by Israel and also by Hizbullah, which, on 11 April, launched an unmanned aerial vehicle into Israeli airspace. Hizbullah announced that its drone had flown over Israeli territory for 18 minutes before returning to Lebanon. A number of Israeli air violations were recorded shortly afterwards and have continued over the past week. On the same day, Geir Pedersen, the Secretary-General's newly appointed Personal Representative for Southern Lebanon, arrived in Beirut to take up his duties. He called on all parties to cease such violations and ensure total calm along the Blue Line. I would add that the increased air activity from both sides creates an additional concern in the risks posed to United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) helicopter patrols along the Blue Line.

Let me end by saying that the international community is coming together to assure the parties that they are not alone and that we will accompany them along the road to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

The end goal remains clear — ending the occupation that began in 1967 and establishing a sovereign, democratic, viable and contiguous Palestinian State living side by side with a secure Israel.

The Israeli disengagement plan offers a real opportunity to revitalize the peace process. For that to happen, it is urgent that we encourage both parties to resume contacts and to work together to prepare for Israel's withdrawal. Coordination, cooperation and agreement between the two parties, and active support from the international community, are needed to achieve a successful disengagement that will lead to further steps towards the implementation of the road map and towards realizing our end goal.

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.